



Living, Learning, & Leading in Residence Life: A Research Study

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Leadership On Campus: Prosocial Behavior Benefits for Resident Assistants

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The roles and responsibilities of resident assistants are increasingly complex (Taub et al., 2016). Resident assistants are often first responders to student-related crisis or emergency situations, including those of safety, behavioral, and mental health (Boone et al., 2016). Resident assistants receive many levels of training and professional development and develop a wide range of skills from on-the-job experiences (Benjamin & Davis, 2016).

Although resident assistants are slated to receive these developmental benefits from training and experience, the research on learning outcomes and developmental benefits associated with serving as a resident assistant is limited. Though the current research suggests resident assistants may develop outcomes such as interpersonal communication, problem-solving, intercultural, and teamwork skills (Benjamin & Davis, 2016), less is known about the development of resident assistants' prosocial behaviors, such as their engagement in social change, social generativity, and social perspective taking.

Resident assistants are predominantly drawn to the position because of their desire to help others (Boone, 2018). Such evidence provides an opportunity for resident assistants to be better primed to further develop greater prosocial behaviors through their training and experiences. The purpose of this study is to examine whether serving as a resident assistant has an effect on undergraduate students' prosocial behaviors.

Methods

We utilized data collected as part of the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL), an international research program that examines the influence of higher education on undergraduates' leadership development. In spring 2018, 70 institutions participated in the MSL and each invited 4,000 randomly-selected students to participate in the survey. We only used randomly-selected students in our sample and the response rates varied between 14% to 48% across the institutions. We narrowed our sample of students down ($n = 4,790$), with half who were resident assistants ($n = 2,395$) and half who were not resident assistants ($n = 2,395$).

We used propensity score matching techniques to match resident assistants in the "treatment" condition with undergraduate students who were not resident assistants in the "control" condition. We also used a variety of covariates in matching, including students' high school leadership experiences, pre-college prosocial behaviors, academic majors, self-reported grade averages, and institutional measures (i.e., size, setting, control, and Carnegie classification).

We also included demographic covariate measures, including students' self-reported gender, age, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, citizenship, transfer status, first-generation status, parents' income, and disability status. We used factor analysis to create our three dependent variables: engagement in social change, social perspective taking, and social generativity. Finally, we analyzed the relationships between serving as a resident assistant and the dependent variables using ordinary least squares regression.

Results

The results of the analyses suggest that students who serve as resident assistants have significantly higher engagement in social change ($\beta = .151$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .023$), social perspective taking abilities ($\beta = .555$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .077$), and social generativity ($\beta = .072$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .005$) than students who were not resident assistants.

Discussion & Limitations

Our pluralistic democracy requires citizens who can work across differences, desire to give back to their communities, and engage in efforts to promote positive social change (Soria & Mitchell, 2015, 2016). The results of this study suggest that resident assistants are uniquely positioned to acquire those prosocial skills related to higher engagement in social change, social perspective taking abilities, and social generativity.

Even after we matched students on their pre-college prosocial skills, demographics, and leadership experiences, resident assistants were significantly more likely than students who were not resident assistants to actively seek to engage in actions to improve society and their

communities, understand and integrate diverse perspectives into their worldviews, and participate in efforts to ensure positive outcomes for future generations.

There are a few important limitations of the present study. For one, while we attempted to match students on several pre-college antecedents and experiences, demographic characteristics, and collegiate experiences in our matched pairs of resident assistants and non-resident assistants, we could not include other developmental antecedents of the prosocial dependent measures, including parental, peer, or school-related influences (Lai et al., 2015; Malonda et al., 2019; Rossi, 2001).

Furthermore, the coefficients demonstrating the effects of serving as a resident assistant on students' prosocial outcomes were relatively small. Serving as a resident assistant explains 2.3% of students' engagement in social change, 7.7% of students' social perspective taking, and 0.5% of students' social generativity. The finding suggests that resident assistants may benefit more from enhanced social perspective taking compared to the other prosocial measures—and that ultimately serving as a resident assistant may not be as important as other factors in understanding students' prosocial behaviors.

Recommended APA Citation

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About the Study

The Principal Investigator for this project is Dr. Krista Soria (ksoria@umn.edu) and the Research Assistant is Brayden Roberts. The research is sponsored by the [Association of College and University Housing Officers-International](#), the [ACUHO-I Research & Education Foundation](#), and [National Association of College and University Residence Halls](#).